Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays
April 5, 2005

Is this building contaminated? Almost four years after mail-borne anthrax attacks killed five Americans, infected twenty-two others and polluted postal facilities, the answer to that urgent "yes or no" question remains a protracted cacophony of "maybes." Recent detections in local Department of Defense (DOD) mail facilities produced painful reminders of persistent gaps in both the science of biological agent detection and the art of communicating test results, and risks, to the public.

Today, with those recent events as context and cautionary tale, we assess the extent of progress by federal agencies toward standardized and validated sampling, testing and analysis protocols for *Bacillus anthracis*.

Each incident of suspected or actual biological contamination will be unique. Every situation presents a daunting array of variables and unknowns. But inherent complexity is no excuse to defer needed research or ignore lessons learned in favor of an *ad hoc*, uncoordinated and scientifically unsound response. All these events pose the same questions: Is it anthrax? Is it still there? Only strong science and vigilant integration of that knowledge into a coordinated response will conquer the unknowns and limit the variables that still plague anthrax detections.

Last year we asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to examine anthrax detection strategies developed by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and other federal agencies. In a report released today GAO finds that despite some scattered efforts, the multi-step anthrax detection and confirmation process still has not been validated, that is, scientifically tested to measure its sensitivity, reliability and limitations.

As a result, those responsible for assessing or mitigating anthrax contamination have scant information on which to base selection of sampling techniques, specimen storage modes or testing methodologies appropriate to the incident at hand. Nor can first responders, potential victims or the public have the degree of confidence they need in positive or negative results that only slowly emerge from this loosely forged chain of custody.

Different anthrax detection technologies emitting different measures of "positive" and "negative" can trigger different responses by local, county, regional, state and federal officials. The public often hears confusing, sometimes contradictory, assessments of the anthrax threat. Law enforcement and public health officials on the scene don't get timely, actionable information on the level of risk.

In effect, workers and the public are expected to serve as human detectors, as the absence of illness is used to prove the absence of contamination. But anthrax detection and remediation should be an environmental, not just an epidemiological, exercise. Proven tenets of environmental science and industrial hygiene can be applied to determine with measurable accuracy when a building is "clean."

Without validated detection protocols, we risk terrorizing ourselves with preventable false positives that subject people to needless countermeasures. And, perhaps more dangerously, we invite false negatives that breed an equally false sense of security.

GAO recommends federal agencies refine their approach to anthrax detection, build on lessons learned and incorporate probability-based sampling techniques into a more coordinated response. Although these recommendations are directed primarily to the Department of Homeland

Security (DHS), it is still not clear who is in charge of this process. As evidenced by our crowded witness panels this afternoon, many have a stake in solving the anthrax puzzle.

But the Department of Health and Human Services, specifically the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Environmental Protection Agency are designated as lead agencies for anthrax detection and remediation. Their testimony today, and that of all our witnesses, will help us understand how this vital public safety and public health process can be improved. DHS, fully engaged today in the TOPOFF III national counterterrorism exercise, will testify at a subsequent hearing.